Alcova Heights – A History of Our Neighborhood
Tony Toth (2025)

In Brief
Alcova Heights is a charming neighborhood in South Arlington whose residents enjoy the commercial and cultural amenities of Columbia Pike as well as the leisure facilities of Alcova Heights Park. Established in 1921 on what had been agricultural land, the development quickly filled with a variety of homes, many of whose residents commuted into Washington, D.C. or to jobs in Arlington. The origins of the oldest house in the neighborhood, called Alcova, are in the 19th century. The stately colonnaded structure survived the Civil War and has undergone many changes. The Virginia state senator who created Alcova Heights lived there, as did a famous writing couple.

Over the years, Alcova Heights has blossomed into a walkable community with its own traditions and character. The changing seasons are marked by summer yard sales and lemonade stands, a colorful parade amidst falling leaves at Halloween, neighbors helping clear sidewalk snow in the winter, and a cavalcade of crocuses, daffodils and redbuds to herald spring. The history of our neighborhood is similar to that of others in Arlington. And yet there are things that make these streets and cozy homes unique.

Looking Back
Take a walk through a woodsy part of Alcova Heights Park on a warm summer's day, within earshot of Doctors Run as it babbles its way toward Four Mile Run, and it is easy to let your imagination take you back to the time before European settlement transformed the lands around our neighborhood. Where now there are streets and yards and houses, there stood tall, ancient trees -- oaks, maples, walnuts and pines – whose shade sheltered deer and bear and wolf. Beavers may have built dams on our little stream, making marshy wetland habitats for migratory birds, fish and other water creatures. Before the streams of Arlington were canalized to quickly drain runoff waters, there were many wetlands around the county, and a two-acre swamp filled with moss was said to be near what is now Alcova Heights.

Native Americans, whose permanent settlements mostly were near the Potomac, hunted in these woods, and walked through them on trading trips. They likely belonged to the Powhatan Confederation, whose members encountered John Smith and the first English settlers at Jamestown. A number of Native American settlements have been found in Arlington. One day, while digging in my back yard on Quincy Street, I unearthed part of a small arrowhead, finely worked in white stone. Our neighborhood was definitely crossed by some of these people, hunting and gathering along the animal runs and footpaths that traversed the woods and meadows.

As European settlers moved inland from Jamestown and other early outposts in the seventeenth century, their settlements became villages, then towns, and cities. The largest nearby towns were Alexandria and Georgetown, bustling centers of shipping and commerce, which thrived because they could use the easy transportation afforded by the Potomac River.

Inland, there was forest and stream, which were turned into profit by tree-cutters and water mill operators. Once large swaths of trees were felled, farmers and ranchers moved in, planting fields and orchards, and raising cattle on rocky pastures to help feed the populations of the towns. A map of this part of Arlington from the eighteenth century shows just a few widely scattered houses and mills, clustered, like the former Native American settlements, near the water. Those closest to the future Alcova Heights were the house and mill owned by John Ball, Masterson's Mill down Four Mile Run, and the Whitford and King houses, below what would become Douglas Park.

The construction of Columbia Pike in the first decades of the nineteenth century connecting Long Bridge across the Potomac and the Little River Turnpike helped to make the south part of what would become Arlington more easily accessible. It was probably some time in the middle of the nineteenth century that the first buildings appeared on the lands that would become Alcova.

Early Settlement

According to county deed books, for example, John M. Young owned 108 acres of land since Sept. 13, 1850 known as Spring Hill Farm. A Civil War map from 1862 shows dwellings labeled "Young" on this acreage, which later became the part of Alcova Heights from about Monroe Street west. Another house, belonging to Joshua Gibson, is the present Alcova House, and it sat on a 38-acre property which was bought in 1868 by a man named Young and which became the rest of Alcova Heights from about Monroe Street east. This was near Hunter's Crossroads, named after Hunter's Chapel, a Methodist house of prayer which stood at the intersection of Columbia Pike and what would become Glebe Road. Also shown on this map are acres of orchards.

During the early stages of the Civil War, Union forces marched across the river and occupied many parts of the highlands of what would become Arlington overlooking Washington, D.C. and built defensive fortifications. These faced Confederate positions nearby, and a number of skirmishes took place between the forces. In 1861, Major S. G. Champlin of the 3rd Michigan Infantry reported on two of these engagements that took place between August 28-30. The map which accompanied this report lists 400 men stationed at Hunter's Chapel and five Union pickets scattered about the area that would become Alcova. (A picket was an advance guard consisting of about 47 men, set up in the dangerous areas between the enemy and the main army's encampments.) Some years ago, I was strolling down the alley between 6th and 7th Streets and noticed something in the newly turned earth by a fence post hole. It was a Civil War-era bullet, probably dropped by a soldier manning one of these pickets.

The Union forces took over the buildings on the Young property, removing the farm's fences and confiscating the animals. Later, the troops used Hunter's Chapel as a hospital, then as a stable. Before the war ended, the main farm house on Young's land had burned down. Consequently, the family filed a claim for compensation, and in 1878 the government awarded $3,198 in damages. Nothing appears to remain from Young's farmstead. The Gibson farmstead,

which Young subsequently moved into, seems to have had a barn, a carriage house, an overseer's house and perhaps a dairy shed.

From an early date, the area was a center for religious institutions. The Arlington United Methodist Church, the successor to Hunter's Chapel, has been around at least since 1893 according to the inscription on its cornerstone: "1893-1945." In 2025 it had been closed for a while, fenced off, its redevelopment in limbo. Other large churches were to follow in later years, including the Arlington Baptist Church, at the corner of 7th Street South and South Monroe Street.

The 142-acre farm was sold around 1915 to a land company headed by the former Virginia state senator from Bristol, Joseph Cloyd Byars. He moved into the farmhouse on Spring Hill Farm and began to expand and improve it in subsequent years. Byars' son, Bailey has recounted some of his recollections of those early years at Alcova Heights. For example, he had told Dan and Alice Nicolson (who lived in the house between 1963 and 2012) that when he first arrived at the house he got off a trolley at 7th Street and Walter Reed Drive, dragging his suitcase through the snow the four blocks to the house. Bailey also told the *Washington Post* in 1995 that as a boy of about 8 he used to hunt squirrels and rabbits around the family's new estate. Byars employed an African-American man as hand on the estate, according to John R. Hanley, who grew up near the Byars place and recounted his memories to the Nicolsons. The black man had worked for Byars in Bristol, and reportedly walked all the way here from there. He was illiterate, according to Hanley, but he started attending school at Patrick Henry.

Byars named his new house "Alcova," an acronym from Alexandria County, Va. (Today's Arlington County at that time was the rural part of Alexandria County, and it became a separate entity in 1920.) In a 1918 deed book it states that the Spring Hill Farm property was platted as a new subdivision called Columbia Place, but apparently no lots were sold.

Alcova Heights is Born

Development began in 1921 in the neighborhood, now named Alcova Heights. Byars led the effort as president of the Alcova Improvement Company, turning the open fields and orchards that had been part of Spring Hill Farms into a grid of streets, home sites and distinctive alleyways.

When the home sites were laid out, most lots were about 50 feet wide and sold for five cents per square foot, so a 5,000 square foot lot would cost $250. Some people purchased two or more lots. A promotional brochure for Alcova Heights from those first days touted the new neighborhood as only 3 ½ miles from the White House (the actual distance is about 7 miles), and a half mile from "One of the largest Radio Stations in the World." This referred to the Naval Radio Station located on what is now South Courthouse Road. The installation's first three massive transmission towers, known as "The Three Sisters," were completed in December 1912 and were used to send time signals to aid navigation and weather reports to ships in the Atlantic between 1913 and 1941. Transportation for neighborhood residents was also convenient, with a street car running from downtown Washington, through Rosslyn on up

towards Fairfax, via Fairfax Drive. Another line ran from Rosslyn to Nauck, with stops along Walter Reed Drive. The brochure also informed prospective buyers that the neighborhood "has an altitude of 220 feet" and that the properties are sold on a monthly payment basis, "under restrictions which guarantee a choice residential community with a corresponding increase in property values."

The late Elizabeth Cannon Kimball was one of the earliest residents of Alcova Heights. She recounted growing up in the neighborhood in an article that appeared in the *Arlington Historical Magazine* in 1975. She told of having been driven from Washington, D.C. to Alcova by her parents in 1920 because they wanted to buy a summer home "in the country." They parked near the intersection of Glebe Road and Columbia Pike. Byars showed Kimball's parents a plat of the subdivision, and they walked to some of the sites. In these early years of the subdivision there were no interior roads, so the only houses were on Glebe Road and Columbia Pike. Kimball's parents, Florence and Andrew Cannon, bought several plots in the 1920s, and Elizabeth recalls living in a building with sawed pine planks for walls that was originally planned as a garage and thus had no insulation. She said, "In the summer it was very pleasant, but winters were something else… A fireplace in mild weather and a pot-bellied stove in winter heated the cabin. We had an abundance of fresh air, sometimes more than we really wanted!"

Kimball says that before a well could be sunk on their land, her family used to draw water from a "clear, bubbling spring" where Seventh and Eighth streets now intersect. (Water percolated to the surface at that location for many years until the county installed a drainage system.) Before the arrival of a county sewage and water system starting around 1936, residents had to rely on springs and wells for drinking water, and on outhouses and septic tanks for waste water disposal. Some of the wells were powered by windmills, as at the Byars house. The Cannons and other Alcova families had to pick up their mail at the post office at the corner of Columbia Pike and Walter Reed Drive. From 1923 to 1935, young Elizabeth Kimball attended Columbia School, a brick building dating to the late nineteenth century, which was at the same corner. Thomas Jefferson Junior High School and Washington-Lee High School opened in 1925. Before that, Kimball says, area students had to attend high school in Washington, D.C., or Mt. Vernon or George Mason high schools "in the lower end of the county." There was a private girl's school adjacent to Alcova Heights called Swidells Junior College. It was established in the 1920s and was located on a spacious campus on the northwest side of the neighborhood.

In June 1921, when Barcroft resident Bob May established the Columbia Pike Bus Line from his home to downtown Washington, Kimball says her father "permanently retired his Hudson, refused to accept any offers of rides to Washington, and exhorted his neighbors to patronize the bus." The company started out as a husband-wife operation, with May as a driver and his wife answering telephone inquiries from their home. But the line added drivers and extended its service to Alexandria and was renamed the AB&W Rapid-Transit Company. Even so, there was still a strong sense of community and togetherness. Kimball says her father knew all the drivers, and often asked them to drop him at his home since the hill from the bus stop up Azalea Street (now Quincy) was steep. On one such occasion Kimball's father asked this favor

of the driver, and added that it was his birthday. When the bus pulled up to the Cannon house, the other passengers started to sing “Happy Birthday.”

Commuting out of the neighborhood involved some inconvenience for some, according to an account given by John Hanley to the Nicolsons. He said there used to be a boggy patch of ground that crossed Lincoln and Monroe and Oakland Streets, and people on their way to work from their homes to the buses on Columbia Pike would wear an old pair of shoes to cross this soggy obstacle, and then change into proper footwear once they reached Columbia Pike. They would stash their grubby shoes behind the Alcova gate until their return trip in the evening.

Bernard and Mary McCann bought their Alcova Avenue (now 7th Street) lot in 1924, when the few neighborhood roads were not even paved. A plat map from 1925 shows just three roads and six houses. Bernard worked for the Pennsylvania Railroad in Washington, and commuted to work each day. The McCanns’ home started out small, with just two rooms. In the early 1930s they excavated a basement, expanded the first floor, and added bedrooms on a second-floor addition. While the workers hammered and sawed, the McCann’s reportedly lived in tents pitched in their backyard.

Byars made many modifications to Alcova house in 1923, employing the talents of architect Edmund St. Cyr Barrington. To the home’s east side was added tall white pillars and a wrought iron balcony. Alcova was also improved with the addition of architectural features such as shutters, paneling, mantels, and flooring that were salvaged from houses being demolished in Georgetown. A set of wrought iron gates from the Smithsonian Museum of Arts and Industries on the Mall for a while graced the estate’s grand entrances on Lincoln Street at Columbia Pike and on Glebe Road next to where the Methodist Church would rise. The carriage house was located behind the house, where 711 S. Lincoln Street stands, and had a cobblestone driveway running diagonally from 8th Street.

Due to financial difficulties brought on by the Great Depression of 1929, Byars sold Alcova to Allen Coe in 1932, retaining only the carriage house as a place to stay during visits. At a later date, Byars moved to a house in the 800 block of Monroe Street, and the carriage house, now dilapidated, was bought by Major General Paul W. Carroway. Because the building was unoccupied for some time, people broke in and caused damage. Some in the neighborhood apparently called the place “haunted,” no doubt because of its run-down appearance, and the caskets that were stored there. Apparently the long-time Alcova owner, William N. Young, had kept the caskets to give away to neighbors who needed them but couldn’t afford to buy new ones due to the poverty that was prevalent after the Civil War. When the Carroways decided to move to Alcova Heights, they tore down the old barn and had a modern home built on the site. It appears that it was during the mid-1930s that the neighborhood’s present street names began to be used. A real estate plat map from 1938 shows streets with the new names and the original names in parentheses, and Swidells Junior College is called Arlington Hall Girls School.

The original street names in Alcova were different from those of today. The first street inside the neighborhood, connecting the Alcova estate with Columbia Pike, was named Springhill Street, later Lincoln. The following table lists the original and current street names.

Evolution of Alcova Heights Street Names

Original Name / Current Name

- Springhill Street / S. Lincoln Street
- Brookdale Avenue / S. 6th Street
- Alcova Avenue / S. 7th Street
- Marconi Avenue / S. 8th Street
- Deepwood Avenue / S. 9th Street
- Linden Avenue / S. Oakland Street
- Virginia Street / S. Monroe Street
- Azalea Street / S. Quincy Street

Several businesses were established on the Columbia Pike side of the Alcova Heights tract. The Alcova Motor Company was opened in 1926 by Homer Bauserman on Columbia Pike. It was a service and sales facility specializing in Hudson-Essex cars with tall gasoline pumps out front. In 1972, Irvin Zetlin moved his restaurant, The Broiler, into the building, serving delicious steak and cheese subs and pizzas for many years. He sold the restaurant in 2000, but it has continued to operate.

World War II and Beyond

Alcova House residents Dan and Alice Nicolson collected several stories about the house's past, including an account by a woman who lived next door during the early 1940s and was friends with Allen Coe's daughter, Jane. The woman remembers an African-American domestic worker who baked pies and bread in the kitchen. The landscape was different then, with a long lawn leading down to Glebe Road and an unobstructed view on the Fourth of July of the fireworks over the capital which the young girls watched from Alcova's balcony. She also remembered lilacs and a tree house and riding in the dumbwaiter from the kitchen to the second floor. She moved away when she was six years old in about 1946. Barbara Cogswell, who moved to the neighborhood in December 1939, when she was one year old, recalls playing with Jane Coe at Alcova House. The girls would spend hours upstairs in rooms unfurnished at the time, and hiding and seeking in the large yard, amidst tall trees and cavernous bushes. Barbara said that at one point Jane's mother set up a chicken adoption service in the house's large kitchen. After neighborhood children got tired of the chicks they had received for Easter, many ended up in a makeshift chicken wire pen in the kitchen.

But the 1940s and World War II also brought turmoil and change to the neighborhood. Bill Cogswell recalled that home construction was halted, as it was around the country, in order to devote materials and manpower to the war effort. He said that neighbors participated in paper and metal drives, hauling newspapers and pots and pans to the collection point at Patrick

Henry School. Residents used ration cards to get their allotment of food items, and driving was curtailed because of gasoline and rubber shortages.

Men from the neighborhood joined Americans from around the country to fight in the various overseas campaigns or to serve in the U.S. Some did not return. Women of the community served on the home front. The War Department commandeered Arlington Hall, and starting in 1942 its buildings housed the Army's Signals Intelligence Service, the largest center for deciphering enemy messages in the country. Many of the facility's cryptographic and clerical positions were held by women, who lived in the former girls' dorms during the war. After the end of the war, the focus of the Arlington Hall code-breakers was on the threat posed by the Soviet Union. The highly classified VENONA project involved collecting and deciphering messages to and from the Soviet Union dealing with U.S. security matters. On December 20, 1946, Meredith Gardener deciphered the first of many Soviet messages that showed their spies had obtained information about classified U.S. nuclear weapons programs. Beginning in 1963, the fledgling Defense Intelligence Agency took over some buildings in Arlington Hall. In 1977 the facilities were turned over to the Army Intelligence Center, and in 1989 the Arlington Hall buildings and lands reverted to more academic uses when they were transformed into the State Department's National Foreign Affairs Training Center, also known as the Foreign Service Institute. Here diplomats and other government employees studied languages, foreign affairs, and subjects related to carrying out U.S. foreign policy at posts around the world. A portion of the Arlington Hall property was given to the Army National Guard for a National Readiness Center.

Despite hardships, people found a way to gather and share good times. Barbara Cogswell said that her parents would join other neighbors in the basement of the Peterson house, because it was large and open, just down 7th Street at the corner of Quincy. The women in large skirts joined their husbands in square dancing sessions that met on a regular basis.

The period after World War Two also saw a boom in church construction. The Arlington Presbyterian Church's cornerstone reads 1949, as does that of the Arlington Seventh Day Adventist Church. And the Arlington Baptist Church has edifices dating to 1950 and 1956. While the Arlington Presbyterian Church's most recent edifice was built in 1949, the original was established in 1908 and was located on Columbia Pike. When that burned down in the 1920s, the congregation moved to a site between Lincoln Street and Glebe Road.

Literary Lights in Alcova House

Around 1950, Alcova Heights became home to some literary lights of national renown when the Alcova property was purchased by John Douglas Wallop III and his wife, Lucille, a year after their marriage. Douglas Wallop wrote *The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant*, a novel published in 1954 which formed the basis for the successful Broadway musical and then the 1958 motion picture, *Damned Yankees*. (Arena Stage put the play on in the fall of 2025.) Lucille, who used her maiden name, Fletcher, professionally, had a long career as a writer and is best known for her radio play, *Sorry, Wrong Number,* which was made into a motion picture starring Barbara Stanwyck and was nominated for an Academy Award. In addition to many

radio plays, including the classic, *The Hitch-Hiker* (made into a film in 1953), Fletcher wrote nine novels, the last titled *Mirror Image* and published in 1988. During the couple's time at Alcova, they added brick sidewalks, a garage, a wrought iron fence and a formal garden. They moved to Maryland in the early 1960s.

Alice and Dan Nicolson and their three children moved into Alcova House in 1963, after buying the house from the Wallops for $43,100. The Nicolsons performed a great deal of research on the house and made renovations to suit their family's needs. Among other things, they added a driveway to a porte-cochere at the new back entry and changes to the interior layout that included a curved staircase. The house was designated a local historic district by the county in 1978.

Opportunities for improvements in Alcova Heights expanded in 1964 with the establishment of the county's Neighborhood Conservation Program. (The name has since been changed to the Arlington Neighborhoods Program.) This provided a method for residents to petition for sidewalks, streetlights, and other improvements. Under the program, sidewalks were installed in the 1960s on 9th Street. And one Alcova resident began what would become a marathon effort to put sidewalks on 7th Street.

Bill Cogswell arrived in the neighborhood in 1961, and has been active ever since. Installing a sidewalk required the approval of 75 percent of the residents on the street, and it was an uphill battle, he says, because of opposition from some neighbors. Cogswell lobbied residents of the street starting in 1966, but was only able to get the required percentage in 1996, with the assistance of other neighbors, including Karla Hagan. Sidewalks and trees were finally installed on 7th Street in 2009. "It took me 43 years," said Cogswell, "but I got it." He added, "Every time I see people walking on the sidewalk, it does my heart good."

Alcova Heights Park is one of the best features of the neighborhood, with grateful parents and grandparents taking young ones down the hill to enjoy the shade of tall trees in the warm months in a place that's perfect for play and picnicking. Before the park was established, perhaps in the 1960s, there was just woods, and a small pedestrian bridge crossed Doctors Run where 8th Street ended. Bill and Barbara Cogswell said it was called "the little white bridge," and in the winter, 8th Street became a thrilling sledding hill. In the early days of the park, they said there was only a slide, swings and a sandbox. After improvements completed in 2023, there is an extensive play area, baseball field, beach volleyball court, basketball court, restrooms, and picnic shelters. On pleasant weekends the park comes alive with joyful shouts and shrieks, and the smell of grilling spare ribs fills the air.

These days Alcova Heights is still changing and getting better. While most of the homes were built between 1921 and 1950, high real estate prices and the desirability of this close-in neighborhood have meant that in-fill development continues to add new homes. Architecturally, there is a mix of Colonials, bungalows, Cape Cods, farmhouses and eclectic styles. There are at least two Sears houses in the community. The Dundree Knolls townhouse

community was added to the neighborhood in the 1980s, and the Alcova Row townhouse complex was completed in the early 2000s.

The Alcova Heights Citizens Association was established on January 21, 1966, and it has served as a forum for community activism and social life, on and off, ever since. (Before that, the neighborhood had fallen under the Columbia Pike Citizens Association.) Many meetings start out with a pot-luck, and agenda items have included neighborhood improvement, safety, traffic-calming, social events, meeting local leaders and tree-planting. Alcova Heights has several neighborhood traditions, including a block party, and a Halloween parade that brings costumed neighbors of all ages down 8th Street to the park. The things that attracted the first residents to Alcova Heights are still here: proximity to DC, good transportation and schools, convenient businesses. What makes people stay are the neighbors who help neighbors, and enjoy gathering together for a cookout, some fireworks, a parade, or just a chat on a quiet sidewalk.

The Author

Tony Toth has been living at the corner of Quincy and 7th Streets since 2001, and spent many hours with his children at the park, and walking the neighborhood's streets and alleys in all seasons.

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